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Is Odette an Artist?

Approaching female creativity in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*

Abstract

This article proposes a more inclusive consideration of manifestations of artistic activity in Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* through the example of Odette Swann's act of self-fashioning in the conclusion of 'Autour de Mme Swann'. The article opens with an overview of the relationship between women and the arts in *la Recherche*: Proust's female characters, apart from actresses, do not express themselves through the canonical arts. But Proust also depicts creative activities of a more domestic nature, which are not usually considered art forms. This article posits that *la Recherche* destabilizes hierarchical categorizations of what should be considered superior or inferior forms of creative expression. As a result, the passages concerned with Odette's *toilettes* should be considered as integral parts of the novel's exploration of the nature of art. Odette's transformation from the Botticellian 'pièce de musée' desired by her husband into a new artefact of her own design is considered in dialogue with Charles Baudelaire's essay 'Le peintre de la vie moderne'. Proust's Odette can be viewed as a response both to Baudelaire's suggestion that female adornment is an aesthetic endeavour and to the complex twofold temporality which Baudelaire finds behind both beauty and great art.

When one thinks of the fictional artists of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, three important names spring to mind: the writer Bergotte, the painter Elstir and the composer Vinteuil. To this list of male characters one may add, almost as an afterthought, the actress La Berma. Educated women in Proust's novel attend or host performances, view or own artworks, read literature, and talk about art at dinner parties. But if they appear as creators, their talents are shown in different areas, for they are (with the exception of acting) excluded from the canonical arts. As a result of this exclusion, one of the best examples of female creativity in *la Recherche* is to be found in the courtesan-become-society lady Odette's self-creation through dress and make up in 'Autour de Mme Swann', paralleled only in this chapter of the novel by the family house-keeper Françoise's cuisine. One might argue that such characters are 'artisans' rather than 'artists', occupying what Malcolm Bowie has called 'the interference-zone between art as supreme value and art as nullity'.¹ But my aim is to

¹ Malcolm Bowie, *Proust Among the Stars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 124.

suggest instead that Odette's outfits (*toilettes*) are fully enmeshed in *la Recherche*'s discourse on 'art as supreme value'.²

This article is intended as a first step towards a wider study of the complex and multifaceted relationship between gender and art in *la Recherche*. In order to do so within a clearly delimited frame, I will centre the present analysis on the representation of Odette's creativity in the ending of 'Autour de Mme Swann' (pp. 604-630).³ The richness of this section of the novel offers us an ideal point of entry into the general question 'what is the status of female creativity in *la Recherche*?' through the individualized question 'is Odette an artist?'. I will argue that Odette's self-creation can be read as Proust's response to the aesthetics proposed in Baudelaire's essay 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne', and in particular the section entitled 'Éloge du maquillage', which suggests that female adornment is an aesthetic pursuit. Proust's work, like Baudelaire's, problematizes received definitions of what constitutes 'art'. *La Recherche* also moves beyond Baudelaire's essay by giving its female characters a greater level of agency. While I do not have the space here to explore Françoise's case in depth, she remains a noteworthy parallel to Odette in so far as both characters in 'Autour de Mme Swann' offer examples of successful creation which are juxtaposed with the protagonist's failure to create.

The reason behind Proust's female characters' exclusion from recognised modes of artistic production is primarily historical. The deep-seated belief that men and women's roles were divided in both social and spatial terms, men being destined for public life and women being destined to care for the household, was shared by many of the great French republican

² Momcilo Milovanovic in his work *Les figures du livre* includes dresses and gastronomy as part of several metaliterary 'figures du livre' to be found in *la Recherche*. *Les figures du livre: Essai sur la coïncidence des arts dans 'À la recherche du temps perdu'* (Paris: Champion, 2005). Milovanovic maintains an ambivalent position as to whether these should be considered artforms. His introduction refers to them as 'formes non artistiques' (p. 7), but then speaks of the connection between all forms of creativity due to 'la consanguinité des arts' (p. 9), thus implying that the umbrella-term 'arts' includes the 'formes non artistiques'.

³ *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, new edn, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89). Henceforth all quotations from *la Recherche* will be referenced through the volume number in latin numerals followed by the page number.

thinkers of the late eighteenth century, and was then inscribed into the law in 1804 with the Napoleonic Code. Upper class women who hosted *salons* held some artistic and political influence through the men they interacted with, and as the century progressed, the Industrial Revolution led to lower class women working in factories, that is, outside the domestic space, which lead to a change in mores. But despite such changes, the idea that women were born ‘naturally’ subordinate and belonged to the domestic sphere still prevailed in France at the end of the nineteenth century, which is when the sections of *la Recherche* concerned with the protagonist’s childhood and adolescence are set.⁴ The general inequality between male and female education extended to artistic education: the École des Beaux-Arts, for instance, did not take female students until 1897 and excluded them from life drawing classes until 1900.⁵ Female writers and intellectuals were stigmatized as ‘bas bleus’ and were the victims of satirical texts, which often suggested that by undertaking an occupation that was unnatural to women, they had renounced their gender. Even George Sand, whose novels feature prominently in *la Recherche* and who was the most famous female author of the nineteenth-century, did not escape this treatment.⁶ Proust’s female characters’ relationship with the canonical arts therefore mirrors the predominant pattern in French society at the time. Apart from the actresses La Berma and Rachel, the two women in *la Recherche* who interact with the arts are the social-climber Mme Verdurin, who is a patron of avant-garde artists, and the elderly aristocrat Mme de Villeparisis, who writes and paints. Both of these characters’ limited involvement in the canonical arts follow the social expectations of their gender. Mme

⁴ Sheila Rowbotham’s *Women, Resistance and Revolution: A History of Women and Revolution in the Modern World* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 36-40 considers the French Revolution’s failure to include women in its drive for reform. Theodor Zeldin’s chapter on ‘Women’ in *A History of French Passions: Volume 1: Ambition, Love and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 344-362 (344-50) offers insight into the social and legal status of French women from the French Revolution to the early twentieth century. Wendelin Guentner’s *Women Art Critics in Nineteenth-Century France: Vanishing Acts* (Newark: University of Delaware Press: 2013), pp. 15-23 offers a succinct survey of the situation of women in nineteenth-century French society.

⁵ Guentner, *Vanishing Acts*, p. 12.

⁶ Guentner, *Vanishing Acts*, pp. 25-28 and Zeldin, *Ambition, Love and Politics*, pp. 355-56.

Verdurin does not attempt to create works of art, but remains a sponsor and spectator. Mme de Villeparisis's paintings are still-lives, which was the only genre considered acceptable to women,⁷ and her choice of the memoir as a genre calls to mind the private sphere as opposed to the public sphere.⁸ Moreover, the narrator's treatment of Mme de Villeparisis's literary production is ambivalent: on the one hand, he suggests that her books are 'bien écrits' (II, 493), but on the other, he uses her as a mouthpiece for a Sainte-Beuvian misapprehension of the value of biographical information when judging works of literature (II, 70).

In contrast with Mme Verdurin and Mme de Villeparisis, who maintain a relationship with the canonical arts, we have the cases of Françoise and Odette, who make the most of what forms of creative expression they have available to them as uneducated women.⁹ When Françoise in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* is compared to Michelangelo at work on a sculpture (I, 437), the simile could be read by some as intended for comical purposes. Such a reading would rest upon the logic that male and female creativity are hierarchized. Male creativity expresses itself through the canonical arts and is therefore superior. Female creations cannot really be considered 'art' and therefore the simile can only be applied in one direction; from inferior creative form to superior creative form. From a feminist perspective, one could argue that the importance given by women such as Françoise to their cooking is delusional, but guarantees that they do not attempt to escape their limited social role.¹⁰ As a result, when female characters such as Françoise are compared to canonical artists, this stresses the distance between the two creative spheres. Proust's treatment of social hierarchies, however, is far from being this prescriptive. As has been persuasively

⁷ Guentner, *Vanishing Acts*, p. 2.

⁸ This is the case also of the grandmother's favourite author, Mme de Sévigné, who wrote letters to her daughter.

⁹ A difference between the two is that, as we shall see further on, Odette also wants to show an understanding of the male dominated canonical arts.

¹⁰ Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution*, p. 29. This idea is also expressed by Zeldin in *Ambition, Love and Politics*, p. 333: 'Repression was compensated for and mitigated by giving women considerable power in strictly limited fields.'

demonstrated by Edward J. Hughes, the author of *la Recherche* seems rather to voice an ‘independent-minded wariness about stridently formulated group identities and attitudes’.¹¹

Hughes illustrates in particular how in *Le Temps retrouvé* established hierarchies are both acknowledged and problematized through a ‘democratic levelling’.¹²

Hughes’s insights on social hierarchies are extremely relevant to our consideration of artistic hierarchies, the order of which is influenced by both class and gender. The hierarchization between what constitutes high art and what is excluded from the category is indeed a social matter, as it is connected to the division of labour criticised by John Ruskin in the *Stones of Venice*.¹³ Proust’s levelling of all forms of creative activity becomes explicit when the simile of Françoise as artist is reversed in *Le Temps retrouvé*, where the male and socially superior narrator-protagonist ponders the nature of his future work of art:

D’ailleurs, comme les individualités (humaines ou non) sont dans un livre faites d’impressions nombreuses qui, prises de bien des jeunes filles, de bien des églises, de bien des sonates, servent à faire une seule sonate, une seule église, une seule jeune fille, ne ferais-je pas mon livre de la façon que Françoise faisait ce boeuf mode, apprécié par M. de Norpois, et dont tant de morceaux de viande ajoutés et choisis enrichissaient la gelée? (IV, 612)

Thus it is that ‘L’adoration perpétuelle’ itself, the very section of *la Recherche* considered as the most idealized elevation of the role of art, flattens out hierarchizations between forms of creative expression.

With this culinary example in mind, my claim that *la Recherche* raises the status of dress and make up to that of an artform may already appear somewhat less controversial. In historical terms, by the time Proust was writing *la Recherche*, fashion design had indeed

¹¹ Edward J. Hughes, *Proust, Class, and Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 268.

¹² Proust, *Class, and Nation*, p. 236

¹³ John Ruskin, ‘The Nature of Gothic’, in *The Stones of Venice* (with illustrations drawn by the author) 3 vol (London: Smith, Elder, 1853-1858), II, pp. 151-231. See also ‘Ruskin and Literacy’ in Proust, *Class, and Nation*, pp. 71-75. On Proust as translator of Ruskin see Cynthia Gamble, *Proust as Interpreter of Ruskin: the Seven Lamps of Translation* (Birmingham, Ala.: Summa, 2002).

become recognized as a form of creative expression.¹⁴ Proust, moreover, was not the first French writer to express a keen interest in the aesthetics of female adornment. The nineteenth-century work most relevant to our present discussion is Charles Baudelaire's 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne', an essay on Constantin Guys which is famous for allowing Baudelaire to develop an artistic manifesto without explicitly speaking of himself.¹⁵ Constantin Guys, who was not an academic painter but a journalist and illustrator who worked with etching, water colour and drawing, is himself a case study for the evolving nature of artistic canons. As has been argued by Rachel Bowlby, Guys stands for 'the uneternal, uncanonical half of art that is said to be excluded by traditional aesthetic values.'¹⁶ In this essay, Baudelaire raises the moral and aesthetic importance of fashion and physical appearance by suggesting that: 'L'idée que l'homme se fait du beau s'imprime dans tout son ajustement, chiffonne ou raidit son habit, arrondit ou aligne son geste, et même pénètre subtilement, à la longue, les traits de son visage.'¹⁷ Baudelaire's developed views on the place of dress and make up in the realms of aesthetics make him a highly productive interlocutor for our exploration of Odette's creative identity. Proust's interest and admiration for Baudelaire's oeuvre in general is well established, and we have evidence that he was acquainted with 'Le Peintre de la vie

¹⁴ It has indeed been argued that it is the Paris of the Second Empire (1850-1870) that first offered the conditions of possibility for the figure of the fashion designer to emerge. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 32.

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne', in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler, new edn, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-1976), II, pp. 683-724.

¹⁶ Rachel Bowlby, "'Half Art': Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*", *Paragraph* 34:1 (2011), 1-11 (7). On 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne' in the wider context of Baudelaire's art criticism see J. A. Hiddleston's *Baudelaire and the Art of Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 180-222.

¹⁷ Baudelaire, 'Peintre de la vie moderne', p. 684.

moderne'.¹⁸ Moreover, Proust actually compares Odette to a woman drawn by Constantin Guys in the ending of *Du Côté de chez Swann* (I, 411). As we are about to see, several of the passages concerned with Odette are rich with intertextual elements suggesting that Proust was responding, be it consciously or unconsciously, to Baudelaire's influential essay.

Odette is linked to art and artists from her very first appearance to the child protagonist as 'la dame en rose', his uncle's mistress. The plural noun 'artistes' appears twice, staging a binary opposition between recognized artists and unsung artists, in this case, courtesans:

— J'adore les artistes, répondit la dame en rose, il n'y a qu'eux qui comprennent les femmes... Qu'eux et les êtres d'élite comme vous. Excusez mon ignorance, ami. Qui est Vulabellé? Est-ce les volumes dorés qu'il y a dans la petite bibliothèque vitrée de votre boudoir? Vous savez que vous m'avez promis de me les prêter, j'en aurai grand soin."
(I, 78)

This reference to artists stresses Odette's alterity to them: she is their mistress, but not one of them. She only views artists as potential male lovers.¹⁹ Her attempts to gain a literary education in this passage, moreover, are futile: the protagonist's uncle has no intention of lending her his books. In 'Un Amour de Swann', the novel's first exhaustive presentation of her character, Odette will repeatedly be described as intellectually feeble and vulgar in her musical and theatrical tastes. She is excluded from the realm of the canonical arts by her

¹⁸ Correspondance, ed. by Philip Kolb, 21 vols (Paris: Plon, 1970-1993), II, p. 461. Adam Watt has offered a comparative reading of the role of the 'everyday' or 'ordinary' in 'Le peintre de la vie moderne' and *la Recherche*, considering specifically the passages concerning Swann's self-delusion with regards to the monetary nature of his relationship with Odette; the episode in which the protagonist almost catches his mistress Albertine cheating on him with a female friend; and the reference to something as mundane as potatoes in the scene of Bergotte's death. Adam Watt, 'Proust: Poet of the Ordinary', in *Au seuil de la modernité: Proust, literature and the arts: essays in memory of Richard Bales*, ed. by Nigel Harkness and Marion Schmid (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 97-111. On Baudelaire's poetry as intertext to *la Recherche* see Antoine Compagnon, "'Le soleil rayonnant sur la mer", ou l'éphithète inégale', in *Proust entre deux siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 187-228. For a recent exhaustive study of Baudelairean intertextuality in *la Recherche*, see Matthieu Vernet, *Proust et Baudelaire: genèse, texte et intertexte*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2013.

¹⁹ Another illustration of this comes in 'Un Amour de Swann' and is also given in direct speech: 'Je crois bien, la poésie, naturellement, il n'y aurait rien de plus beau si c'était vrai, si les poètes pensaient tout ce qu'ils disent. Mais bien souvent, il n'y a pas plus intéressé que ces gens-là. J'en sais quelque chose, j'avais une amie qui a aimé un espèce de poète. Dans ses vers il ne parlait que de l'amour, du ciel, des étoiles. Ah! ce qu'elle a été refaite! Il lui a croqué plus de trois cent mille francs.' (I, 237).

gender and her lack of education. But another reference to artists made in the ‘dame en rose’ episode suggests not an alterity, but a similarity which progressively becomes an equality:

Il m’a semblé plus tard que c’était un des côtés touchants du rôle de ces femmes oisives et studieuses, qu’elles consacrent leur générosité, leur talent, un rêve disponible de beauté sentimentale – car, comme les artistes, elles ne le réalisent pas, ne le font pas entrer dans le cadre de l’existence commune – et un or qui leur coûte peu, à enrichir d’un sertissage précieux et fin la vie fruste et mal dégrossie des hommes. Comme celle-ci, dans le fumoir où mon oncle était en vareuse pour la recevoir, répandait son corps si doux, sa robe de soie rose, ses perles, l’élégance qui émane de l’amitié d’un grand-duc, de même elle avait pris quelque propos insignifiant de mon père, elle l’avait travaillé avec délicatesse, lui avait donné un tour, une appellation précieuse et y enchâssant un de ses regards d’une si belle eau, nuancé d’humilité et de gratitude, elle le rendait changé en un bijou artiste, en quelque chose de “tout à fait exquis”. (I, 77)

The passage through its reference to gold resonates with the novel’s other alchemical metaphors, which are associated with artistic creation.²⁰ As is well known, the use of alchemy as a metaphor for artistic, and more particularly, for literary creation is a trope that Proust inherited from Baudelaire.²¹ But the passage does not only resonate with Baudelaire’s oeuvre in general: its specific reference to jewelry-making creates a powerful intertext with the opening paragraph of ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ ’s section on ‘La femme’:

L’être qui est, pour la plupart des hommes, la source des plus vives [...] jouissances ; l’être vers qui ou au profit de qui tendent tous leurs efforts ; cet être terrible et incommunicable comme Dieu (avec cette différence que l’infini ne se communique pas parce qu’il aveuglerait et écraserait le fini, tandis que l’être dont nous parlons n’est peut-être incompréhensible que parce qu’il n’a rien à communiquer) ; [...] pour qui, mais surtout *par qui* les artistes et les poètes composent leurs plus délicats bijoux ; de qui dérivent les plaisirs les plus énervants et les douleurs les plus fécondantes, la femme en un mot, n’est pas seulement pour l’artiste en général, et pour M. G. en particulier, la femelle de l’homme.²²

The passage from the ‘dame en rose’ episode inverts the Baudelairean text. In Baudelaire’s model, the male poet or artist crafts jewels for a woman he desires, out of the inspiration drawn from this woman, despite the fact that she has ‘nothing to communicate’. In Proust’s text, it is the woman who is an artist creating jewels out of the ‘propos insignifiant’ of

²⁰ For example: ‘Mais le génie, même le grand talent, vient moins d’éléments intellectuels et d’affinement social supérieurs à ceux d’autrui, que de la faculté de les transformer, de les transposer.’ (I, 544).

²¹ Proust’s use of alchemical metaphors has been explored in this journal by Margaret Topping. Margaret Topping, ‘Artists and Alchemists in Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*’, *French Studies* 60: 4 (2006), 466-478.

²² Baudelaire, ‘Peintre de la vie moderne’, p. 713.

a man. The effort made by Proust's text to cast the everyday talent of courtesans into a new light becomes all the more clear if we rest our attention on a particular phrase. In 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne' we read that it is for 'la femme' that 'les artistes et les poètes composent leurs plus délicats bijoux', whereas the 'dame en rose' is described as having 'travaillé avec délicatesse' in order to create 'un bijou artiste'. Delicateness in Baudelaire's text is associated with the artefact, whereas in Proust's text it is associated with the creative process. The word 'artiste' is used in Baudelaire's text as a subject, whereas in Proust's text it becomes an adjective for the result of the creative process. The Proustian text enacts the subject's accretion of authority through the creative process itself ('travaillé', 'donné', 'enchâssant', 'nuancé', 'rendait changé) which allows Odette and her like to go from being compared to artists ('comme les artistes') to actually *being* artists: if the jewel is qualified as 'artiste', this implies something about its creator. In Baudelaire's case, qualifying the jewel as 'artiste' would have been unnecessary and even tautological, because the jewel-makers are none other than 'les artistes et les poètes'.

The opening paragraph of Baudelaire's section on 'La femme' clearly segregates men and women into two separate functions of the creative process: the men are creative subjects and the women are objects of inspiration for these creative individuals. However, the end of the section brings up the 'harmonie générale' of a well-dressed woman, and the admiration that all (male) artists will feel when confronted with 'une toilette savamment composée'.²³ These ending observations of the section on 'La femme' lead the reader into the provocative section of 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne' entitled 'Éloge du maquillage'. Baudelaire famously opens his 'éloge' by decrying the moral elevation of nature operated by the eighteenth century, and associates nature instead with sin, violence and crime, in order to claim that: 'La vertu, au contraire, est *artificielle*, surnaturelle [...]. Le mal se fait sans effort, *naturellement*,

²³ Baudelaire, 'Peintre de la vie moderne', p. 714.

par fatalité; le bien est toujours le produit d'un art.'²⁴ All efforts in dress and make up in this context become a pursuit of an ideal, 'un essai permanent et successif de réformation de la nature'.²⁵ According to Baudelaire's essay, all women should pursue this ideal of beauty constructed through artifice: 'il faut qu'elle [la femme] étonne, qu'elle charme; idole, elle doit se dorer pour être adorée. Elle doit donc emprunter à tous les arts les moyens de s'élever au-dessus de la nature pour mieux subjuguier les coeurs et frapper les esprits'.²⁶ Women, then, are capable of pursuing beauty and may make conscious aesthetic choices (in their use of make up and dress) to this end. The difference with (male) artists is that they are simultaneously the creator, the raw material and the artefact. This leads us to ask: does the 'Éloge du maquillage' suggest then that women are artists? An answer to this question may be inferred from the concluding sentence of the 'éloge':

Je permets volontiers à ceux-là que leur lourde gravité empêche de chercher le beau jusque dans ses plus minutieuses manifestations, de rire de mes réflexions et d'en accuser la puérile solennité; leur jugement austère n'a rien qui me touche; je me contenterai d'en appeler auprès des véritables artistes, ainsi que des femmes qui ont reçu en naissant une étincelle de ce feu sacré dont elles voudraient s'illuminer tout entières.²⁷

Women and 'véritables artistes' may side together against their austere judges and share an equal ability to find beauty 'dans ses plus minutieuses manifestations', but they remain separate human categories.

It would seem at first that 'Autour de Mme Swann', the chapter of *la Recherche* in which we encounter Odette under the new guise of Swann's wife and Gilberte's mother, maintains the nineteenth-century segregation of gender and art. Odette's attempts to appear 'artistic' are shown as essentially vacuous. The 'désordre artiste' and 'pêle-mêle d'atelier' (I,

²⁴ Ibid., p. 715.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 716.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 717.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 717-18.

604) of her *salons* are choices of interior design rather than symptoms of her creativity,²⁸ and her opinions are just as superficial:

Elle avait l'habitude de dire qu'elle se passerait plus aisément de pain que d'art et de propreté, et qu'elle eût été plus triste de voir brûler *La Joconde* que des "foultitudes" de personnes qu'elle connaissait. Théories qui semblaient paradoxales à ses amies, mais la faisaient passer pour une femme supérieure auprès d'elles et lui valaient une fois par semaine la visite du ministre de Belgique [...]. (I, 605)

The educated reader knows that there is nothing original about such proclamations, and is amused instead by the incongruous juxtaposition of art with hygiene. The reference to the 'ministre de Belgique', as small a 'big shot' as one could be, adds further comedy to the inflated importance that is given to Odette's views on art, which are still as poorly developed and superficial as when she first met Swann. But the *coup de grâce* is given when the narrator associates Odette with artistically inclined society women in general:

Dans la chambre où on la trouvait le plus souvent et dont elle disait: "Oui, je l'aime assez, je m'y tiens beaucoup; je ne pourrais pas vivre au milieu de choses hostiles et pompier; c'est ici que je travaille" (sans d'ailleurs préciser si c'était à un tableau, peut-être à un livre, le goût d'en écrire commençait à venir aux femmes qui aiment à faire quelque chose et à ne pas être inutiles), elle était entourée de Saxe [...]. (I, 605)

The very idea that art should be pursued in order to be 'utile' is in itself intended ironically in a novel which presents utilitarianism as anathema to artistic creation.²⁹ These women hoping to make themselves useful are working on the basis of a complete misconception of the role of art. The sentence structure itself, which places the female dilettantes between brackets within a subordinate clause, suggests that one should not dwell on them, but pass on. What the narrator's social satire, which is reminiscent of nineteenth-century slurs on 'bas-bleus', is ultimately driving at is that Odette's creativity in particular, and female creativity in general,

²⁸ The fin-de-siècle taste for interior design which is encoded as 'artistic' has been analysed by Janell Watson, who fruitfully reads literary passages alongside contemporary how-to manuals, trade journals, and newspaper articles on interior decor. See Janell Watson, 'The fashionable artistic interior: Social (re)encoding in the domestic sphere', *Literature and Material Culture from Balzac to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 57-82.

²⁹ The view that literature should be useful, or rather, relevant to current events, is presented by the diplomat Norpois, whose over emphatic terms show a deep misconception of artistic merit (I, 464-65). An older Bergotte, who has lost his talent for writing, will continue publishing under the pretext that 'cela n'est pas inutile à mon pays' (I, 546-47). Within the epiphanies of *Le Temps retrouvé* we will finally find a rejection of 'un art populaire comme d'un art patriotique' (I, 466).

cannot be expressed through the canonical arts. Odette in ‘Autour de Mme Swann’ is as far from understanding what being an artist in the canonical sense entails as she was when exclaiming ‘J’adore les artistes!’ Indeed, she is even presented as an obstacle to the protagonist’s literary development:

Quand je lui disais que je ne pouvais pas venir, qu’il fallait que je restasse à travailler, elle avait l’air de trouver que je faisais bien des embarras, qu’il y avait un peu de sottise et de prétention dans mes paroles:

“Mais Bergotte vient bien, lui? Est-ce que vous trouvez que ce qu’il écrit n’est pas bien? [...]”

Et elle ajoutait:

“Venez, il vous dira mieux que personne ce qu’il faut faire.” Et c’était comme on invite un engagé volontaire avec son colonel, c’était dans l’intérêt de ma carrière, et comme si les chefs-d’œuvre se faisaient “par relations” qu’elle me disait de ne pas manquer de venir le lendemain dîner chez elle avec Bergotte.

(I, 571)

‘Autour de Mme Swann’, in this aspect, seems to reiterate other nineteenth-century writers’ misogynistic exclusion of women from the arts. But Proust’s text, as well as rejecting Odette from the canonical arts, also follows the aesthetics of ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ by treating personal adornment as a pursuit of an ideal. All the misapprehensions Odette seems to have when it comes to the canonical arts disappear when she concerns herself with her *toilettes*, which go against any notion of utilitarianism:

On sentait qu’elle ne s’habillait pas seulement pour la commodité ou la parure de son corps; elle était entourée de sa toilette comme de l’appareil délicat et spiritualisé d’une civilisation. (I, 609)

Elle réservait ainsi, elle faisait occuper à sa toilette cet intervalle d’élégance dont les hommes à qui Mme Swann parlait le plus en camarade, respectaient l’espace et la nécessité, non sans une certaine déférence de profanes, un aveu de leur propre ignorance, et sur lequel ils reconnaissaient à leur amie, comme à un malade sur les soins spéciaux qu’il doit prendre, ou comme à une mère sur l’éducation de ses enfants, compétence et juridiction. (I, 625-26)

Our second quotation’s far-ranging metaphors (religion, medication and education) suggest an ironic narratorial stance towards Odette’s bedazzled and slightly gauche admirers. But the smile they elicit should not divert our attention from the radical nature of Proust’s operation as the very same paragraph unfolds:

D’autant plus que déjà persuadé qu’en vertu de la liturgie et des rites dans lesquels Mme Swann était profondément versée, sa toilette était unie à la saison et à l’heure par un lien

nécessaire, unique, les fleurs de son flexible chapeau de paille, les petits rubans de sa robe me semblaient naître du mois de mai plus naturellement encore que les fleurs des jardins et des bois; et pour connaître le trouble nouveau de la saison, je ne levais pas les yeux plus haut que son ombrelle, ouverte et tendue comme un autre ciel plus proche, clément, mobile et bleu. Car ces rites, s'ils étaient souverains, mettaient leur gloire, et par conséquent Mme Swann mettait la sienne, à obéir avec condescendance au matin, au printemps, au soleil, lesquels ne me semblaient pas assez flattés qu'une femme si élégante voulût bien ne pas les ignorer et eût choisi à cause d'eux une robe d'une étoffe plus claire, plus légère [...]. (I, 626)

This description of Odette's *toilettes* takes Baudelaire's suggestion that 'la femme' should seek to elevate herself above nature to an entirely new level: it reverses the order of the world. Odette's artifice is so successful that it appears to be more natural than nature itself, thus defying the received hierarchization between the natural and the artificial attacked by Baudelaire in the 'Éloge du maquillage'.³⁰ Odette, perceived through the admiring eyes of the adolescent protagonist, in this sense is the actualization of the Baudelairian aesthetic project.

By pushing the aesthetics of the 'Éloge' further, Proust's text also gives Odette a greater level of agency. While Baudelaire touches on the notion of female adornment as an aesthetic pursuit, but then abandons the subject before going so far as to include women in the male-dominated sphere of artistic endeavour, Proust's descriptions of Odette's self-fashioning reveal a process in which she ceases to be a passive object shaped by external factors, and becomes instead a creative subject:

Ce n'était pas seulement l'ameublement du salon d'Odette, c'était Odette elle-même que [...] tous ceux qui avaient fréquenté Mme de Crécy auraient eu peine [...] à reconnaître. Elle semblait avoir tant d'années de moins qu'autrefois! Sans doute, cela tenait en partie à ce qu'elle avait engraisé [...] et d'autre part à ce que les coiffures nouvelles, aux cheveux lissés, donnaient plus d'extension à son visage qu'une poudre rose animait, et où ses yeux et son profil, jadis trop saillants, semblaient maintenant résorbés. Mais une autre raison de ce changement consistait en ceci que, arrivée au milieu de la vie, Odette s'était enfin découvert, ou inventé, une physionomie personnelle, un "caractère" immuable, un "genre de beauté", et sur ses traits décousus — qui pendant si longtemps, livrés aux caprices hasardeux et impuissants de la chair, prenant à la moindre fatigue pour un instant des années, une sorte de vieillesse passagère, lui avaient composé tant bien que mal, selon son humeur et selon sa mine, un visage épars, journalier, informe et charmant — avait appliqué ce type fixe, comme une jeunesse immortelle. (I, 606)

The changes in Odette's physical appearance become increasingly self-controlled as the passage develops: we first learn that she has put on weight (which could or could not be a

³⁰ The slippage between the artificial and the natural also occurs earlier on, when we are told Odette's body 'donnait à la percaline une expression humaine' (I, 608).

conscious decision), then that her hairstyle and her make up are different (though controlled by Odette, the change in hairstyle is mainly caused by fashion and is therefore externally motivated), and finally, we reach ‘une autre raison’, and here Odette’s agency becomes explicit. No longer passively letting the contingencies of ‘la chair’ decide of her appearance for her (‘lui avaient composé’, a verb with artistic connotations which seem to cast ‘la chair’ as a rival creator), she has become active: ‘Odette s’était enfin découvert, ou inventé, une physionomie personnelle’. Odette’s elaborate creation will be returned upon in the second part of *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, ‘Nom de Pays: le Pays’, when the protagonist views Elstir’s old portrait of Odette in drag entitled ‘Miss Sacripant’:

Le portrait était antérieur au moment où Odette disciplinant ses traits avait fait de son visage et de sa taille cette création dont, à travers les années, ses coiffeurs, ses couturiers, elle-même — dans sa façon de se tenir, de parler, de sourire, de poser ses mains, ses regards, de penser — devaient respecter les grandes lignes. (II, 216)

Odette in this sentence is the designer who traced the ‘grandes lignes’, the material (or the original ‘traits’) which had to be re-elaborated, and the living ‘création’ self-consciously respecting its design. Artifice has outdone nature. Following Baudelaire’s lead, Proust’s text does not espouse a moral ranking of the natural as eminently preferable to the artificial. ‘Odette *ne varietur*’, as the narrator calls the new Odette, is indeed far more beautiful than the old Odette, and husband’s continued preference for the latter version is considered depraved (II, 216).

Charles Swann, who is an art critic, becomes physically attracted to Odette, who is not his type, on the grounds that she called to mind Sandro Botticelli’s fresco of Jethro’s daughter, Zephora: ‘le baiser et la possession qui semblaient naturels et médiocres s’ils lui étaient accordés par une chair abîmée, venant couronner l’adoration d’une pièce de musée, lui parurent devoir être surnaturels et délicieux’ (I, 221). In the triangulation of ‘Un Amour de Swann’, Botticelli is the artist, Swann the viewer, and Odette, not even an artwork, but a

proxy for an artwork. In ‘Autour de Mme Swann’, the narrator after having described the change in Odette, focalizes on Swann’s reception of the new Odette:³¹

Swann avait dans sa chambre, au lieu des belles photographies qu’on faisait maintenant de sa femme, et où la même expression énigmatique et victorieuse laissait reconnaître [...] sa silhouette et son visage triomphants, un petit daguerréotype ancien tout simple, antérieur à ce type, et duquel la jeunesse et la beauté d’Odette, non encore trouvées par elle, semblaient absentes. Mais sans doute Swann [...] goûtait-il dans la jeune femme grêle aux yeux pensifs, aux traits las, à l’attitude suspendue entre la marche et l’immobilité, une grâce plus botticellienne. Il aimait encore en effet à voir en sa femme un Botticelli. Odette qui au contraire cherchait non à faire ressortir, mais à compenser, à dissimuler ce qui, en elle-même, ne lui plaisait pas, ce qui était peut-être, pour un artiste, son “caractère”, mais que comme femme elle trouvait des défauts, ne voulait pas entendre parler de ce Peintre. Swann possédait une merveilleuse écharpe orientale [...] qu’il avait achetée parce que c’était exactement celle de la Vierge du *Magnificat*. Mais Mme Swann ne voulait pas la porter. Une fois seulement elle laissa son mari lui commander une toilette [...] d’après la Primavera du *Printemps*. Parfois, le soir, quand elle était fatiguée, il me faisait remarquer tout bas comme elle donnait sans s’en rendre compte à ses mains pensives, le mouvement délié, un peu tourmenté de la Vierge [...]. Mais il ajoutait “Surtout ne le lui dites pas, il suffirait qu’elle le sût pour qu’elle fit autrement.” (I, 606-07)

Swann wants to see a Botticelli in Odette, even if it means closing his eyes to the Odette in front of him. The old photograph in his room repeats the role of Zephora in ‘Un Amour de Swann’: ‘Il plaça sur sa table de travail, comme une photographie d’Odette, une reproduction de la fille de Jéthro’ (I, 221). The ‘real’ Odette, however, is just as artificial as the object of Swann’s desire is. A binary is set up through the repetition of the key words ‘type’ and ‘caractère’: Odette’s ‘type fixe’ versus Swann’s ‘daguerréotype’; Odette’s ‘“caractère” immuable’ versus ‘ce qui était peut-être, pour un artiste, son “caractère”’ (I, 606-07).³² What is at stake is not a fight between the natural and the artificial, but a fight for independence, which is achieved through an act of creation. While Miss Sacripant and Zephora are versions of Odette created by others, ‘Odette *ne varietur*’ is her own creation.

Odette’s emancipation from these men’s shaping gazes is not always presented in a charitable light. ‘Nom de Pays: le Pays’, for instance, contrasts the genius of painters such as

³¹ Focalization is here intended in the Genettian sense. See Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit: essai de méthode*, in *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 65-273 (203).

³² Elstir too, we are told in ‘Nom de Pays: le Pays’, had he been confronted with Odette’s ‘type nouveau’ would have painted her ‘suivant un ordre absolument contraire, répondant à un autre type’ (II, 216). Rather than being accused of depravation, Elstir’s tendency to paint all women according to his own ‘idéal féminin et pictural’ (II, 216) is here seen as a mark of his creative genius (II, 216-18).

Elstir with the ‘coquetterie’ and ‘conception égoïste de la beauté’ of women (II, 218). Yet, despite such ambivalent elements, it is clear that Odette’s highly personal *toilettes* are a source of admiration: ‘une sorte d’individualité vestimentaire, particulière à cette femme, et qui donnait à ses mises les plus différentes un même air de famille’ (I, 609); ‘Et je comprenais que ces canons selon lesquels elle s’habillait, c’était pour elle-même qu’elle y obéissait’ (I, 626). Odette’s transformation in ‘Autour de Mme Swann’ is twofold. First, she erases any elements that may allow Swann to project on her his Botticellian fantasies. Secondly, she creates *toilettes* which express her individuality and allude to the different layers of time she has inhabited. This second aspect is what makes ‘Autour de Mme Swann’ an important point of dialogue between Baudelairean and Proustian aesthetics.

The most striking aspect of Odette’s creative act is its defiance of time, which revisits Baudelaire’s discussion of beauty and art’s double temporality:

Le beau est fait d’un élément éternel, invariable, dont la quantité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d’un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l’on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l’époque, la mode, la morale, la passion. (II, 685)

La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable. Il y a eu une modernité pour chaque Peintre ancien; la plupart des beaux portraits qui nous restent des temps antérieurs sont revêtus des costumes de leur époque. (II, 695)

Baudelaire argues in ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ that beauty (and consequently great art) is partly contingent and individual, and partly eternal and general. He also argues that art, in order to become eternal, should strive to capture the contingent, present moment. Baudelaire in this respect is critical of Medievalism and Orientalism, which in their vague and idealized settings fail to extract the hidden beauty of everyday human existence.³³ Odette, like Constantin Guys, Baudelaire’s painter of modern life, achieves for herself a ‘“caractère” immuable’ and ‘jeunesse immortelle’ through the inclusion of temporally and individually specific details. Indeed, the great paradox of Odette’s newly found youth is that instead of

³³ Baudelaire, ‘Peintre de la vie moderne’, p. 695.

seeking to dissimulate her years, it incorporates her past: ‘Mme Swann cependant avait voulu, avait su garder un vestige de certaines d’entre elles [les modes détrônées], au milieu de celles qui les avaient remplacées’ (I, 608).³⁴ The passage lists several examples of Odette’s allusions to the outfits of her youth, thus falling within what Bowie has identified as *la Recherche*’s motif of artistic superimposition.³⁵

une rampe ajourée et large de dentelle noire qui faisait penser aux volants d’autrefois. [...] le “dépassant” en dents de scie de sa chemisette avait l’air du revers entrevu de quelque gilet absent, pareil à l’un de ceux qu’elle avait portés quelques années plus tôt [...]; et sa cravate — de cet “écossais” auquel elle était restée fidèle, mais en adoucissant tellement les tons [...] que l’on aurait presque cru à un de ces nouveaux taffetas gorge de pigeon qui étaient la dernière nouveauté — était nouée de telle façon sous son menton, sans qu’on pût voir où elle était attachée, qu’on pensait invinciblement à ces “brides” de chapeaux qui ne se portaient plus. (I, 609)

Odette’s process is more complex than that of the painter of modern life’s capturing of a single present moment. As indicated by the temporal markers ‘autrefois’, ‘quelques années plus tôt’, ‘restée fidèle’, and ‘ne se portaient plus’, Odette has captured not one, but several different moments of her own past — which, as opposed to the unexperienced past of Medievalism, is as individual as Baudelaire’s sought-after present moment. On top of this, she has also captured the present moment, as made manifest by ‘la dernière nouveauté’ of fashion. All these contingent moments are brought together in the crucible of her *toilette*, so that latest arrival and nostalgic allusion can no longer be told apart. Odette’s *toilettes* operate in the same way as Proustian involuntary memory: by having one foot in the past and one foot in the present, they transcend time:

j’éprouvais à la fois dans le moment actuel et dans un moment éloigné le bruit de la cuiller sur l’assiette, l’inégalité des dalles, le goût de la madeleine, jusqu’à faire empiéter le passé sur le présent, à me faire hésiter à savoir dans lequel des deux je me trouvais; au vrai, l’être qui alors goûtait en moi cette impression la goûtait en ce qu’elle avait de commun dans un jour ancien et maintenant, dans ce qu’elle avait d’extra-temporel [...], c’est à dire en dehors du temps. (IV, 449-50)

³⁴ Jean-Pierre Richard compares Odette’s *toilettes* to a palimpsest. *Proust et le monde sensible* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p. 200.

³⁵ ‘*Superposition*, or the ability to think in layers and levels, is a necessary condition for artistic success.’ Malcolm Bowie, ‘Reading Proust Between the Lines’, in *The Strange M. Proust* (London: Legenda, 2009), 125-34 (p. 128).

And indeed, Odette's victory over time will continue, all the way to the 'bal de têtes', where amid the death and decay she appears as 'un défi [...] miraculeux aux lois de la chronologie' (IV, 526).

'Autour de Mme Swann' is the chapter of *la Recherche* concerned with the adolescent protagonist's artistic development: he goes to the theatre for the first time, he receives feedback on his only piece of writing, he meets his favourite writer and he convinces his parents to let him attempt a literary career. But all of these encounters with the canonical arts are failures: he does not appreciate La Berma's performance, Norpois tears apart his only creation, meeting Bergotte in the flesh is no match for knowing Bergotte through his literature, and the protagonist constantly procrastinates and fails to write anything at all. In this context, Odette's creative act remains unparalleled — except, perhaps, by Françoise's cooking. As we have seen, it is well illustrated that Odette possesses no understanding of the literary creative process. But her *toilettes* weave together the many threads of her existence through time into a harmonious extra-temporal whole. In doing so they function as an allegory for Proust's text: 'Comme dans un beau style qui superpose des formes différentes et que fortifie une tradition cachée' (I, 608), and for the narrator-protagonist's projected novel:

Aussi, si elle [ma vie] m'était laissée assez longtemps pour accomplir mon oeuvre, ne manquerais-je pas d'abord d'y décrire les hommes [...] comme occupant une place [...] prolongée sans mesure puisqu'ils touchent simultanément, comme des géants plongés dans les années à des époques, vécues par eux si distantes, entre lesquelles tant de jours sont venus se placer — dans le Temps. (IV, 625)

In *Le Temps retrouvé* the narrator-protagonist's future novel is humbly compared to a dress rather than to a cathedral: 'je bâtirais mon livre, je n'ose pas dire ambitieusement comme une cathédrale, mais tout simplement comme une robe' (IV, 610). While the simile of the cathedral here seems too elevated for himself, the narrator has no qualms however about applying it to Odette's *toilettes*:

je découvrais dans la chemisette mille détails d'exécution qui avaient eu grande chance de rester inaperçus, comme ces parties d'orchestre auxquelles le compositeur a donné tous ses soins, bien qu'elles ne doivent jamais arriver aux oreilles du public; ou dans les

manches de la jaquette [...] je regardais longuement [...] quelque détail exquis, une bande d'une teinte délicieuse, une satinette mauve habituellement cachée aux yeux de tous, mais aussi délicatement travaillées que les parties extérieures, comme ces sculptures gothiques d'une cathédrale dissimulées au revers d'une balustrade à quatre-vingt pieds de hauteur; aussi parfaite que les bas-reliefs du grand porche mais que personne n'avait jamais vues avant qu'au hasard d'un voyage, un artiste n'eût obtenu de monter se promener en plein ciel, pour dominer toute la ville, entre les deux tours. (I, 626-27)

As well as elevating the status of Odette's creativity through its references to architecture (one may also think here of Elstir's explication of the *église de Balbec's* façade [II, 196-97]), this passage through its references to musical composition and air-travel connects Odette's *toilettes* to the section of *La Prisonnière* describing the power of art through the example of Vinteuil's Septet: 'avec un Elstir, avec un Vinteuil; avec leurs pareils, nous volons vraiment d'étoiles en étoiles' (III, 756-63 [762]).³⁶

Odette may be a very small 'étoile', and one perhaps less attractive to explore than 'un Elstir' or 'un Vinteuil'. But she is nonetheless the centre of a universe of her own: 'le petit monde dont elle était le soleil' (I, 605). Her creative medium is unorthodox, yet she uses it to great effect, bringing together in a unique and stunning ensemble the minute parts of her individual existence. Moreover, by stepping into the public space of the park, Odette becomes an ambulatory work of art that can be viewed by all passers-by. This makes the result of her aesthetic endeavours more democratically available than Vinteuil's music, which is only performed within the private context of *salons*, and Elstir's paintings, which hang on private walls. Odette's *toilettes*, unlike the works of the canonical artists of *la Recherche*, will not live on after her death (III, 693; I, 420). Through them Proust rejects, as Baudelaire did before him, 'art's confinement to established, and would-be permanent, media and modes of display'.³⁷ By granting aesthetic vision to an uneducated former prostitute, Proust's novel radically democratises creative expression. Lying at the heart of one of literature's most

³⁶ On aeronautical metaphors see William C. Carter, 'The Artist as Aviator', in *The Proustian Quest* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 187-205.

³⁷ Rachel Bowlby, "'Half Art'", p. 2.

canonical texts, Odette's creative success is a subversive force which destabilizes our received notions of artistic hierarchies.